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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 NEW DELHI 000079

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS, DRL, DS/IP/SCA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ASEC](#) [IN](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#)

SUBJECT: NEUTRALIZING PARTITION? CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS IN
PUNJAB

REF: NEW DELHI 1063

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Sporadic violent clashes and riots in 2009 involving migrant laborers in Punjab have highlighted the changing demographics of India's wealthiest state. Punjab has historically imported labor to fuel its high agricultural and industrial growth rate. According to Embassy contacts, labor from states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar has been increasingly replaced in the last decade by migrants from further afield, including Muslim Bengali-speaking laborers. Although landowners and businesses have largely welcomed and encouraged the migration into Punjab, cultural, religious, caste and class difference are fueling fears of political and social tension. The possibility that many or most of these Muslim migrants may be from Bangladesh adds another layer of complexity to the political mix. END SUMMARY

Muslims return to Indian Punjab

12. (SBU) Tarun Vij, Director of American India Foundation (AIF), asserted that Dalit (former untouchables) laborers from Bihar and U.P. have been replaced by even cheaper un-skilled Bengali-speaking Muslim labor since 2000. "On a visit in 2004, I heard the Muslim call to prayer in Ludhiana for the first time in my life" said Pradeep Kashyap, Vice-Chairman of AIF during a recent meeting with PolOff. Mosques in Punjab, once padlocked after the partition of Indian in 1947 and the ensuing mass exodus of Punjabi Muslims into Pakistan, are reopening and thriving. "Punjab, on both sides of the border, experienced what we would call ethnic cleansing today. There were almost no Muslims left in Indian Punjab, today, that is no longer true. Partition based on religion seems irrelevant in the face of economics" said Kashyap. (Note: The district of Malerkotla is a historical anomaly. Its Punjabi Muslim community was not displaced during Partition and has since prospered because of the protection guaranteed to it by the Sikh community, payback for a 17th century act of kindness by the Muslim Nawab of Malerkotla to the family of a Sikh guru. End Note.)

The Contentious Issue Of Nationality

13. (SBU) Not all observers view this side-effect of economic development positively. Nakul Bharadwaj, a young Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) activist and former president of the BJP's youth wing, believes that many migrants are not Indian nationals. He accused the Indian National Congress (INC) party of facilitating ration cards for Bangladeshi migrants living in Haryana and Punjab. A ration card serves as proof of identity and grants card holders the right to vote. "These workers are working in India illegally and they cause trouble. The local people are angry, but Congress has given them (the Bangladeshi migrants) the vote illegally and made Indians powerless in their own country."

14. (SBU) Most NGOs working on the ground in Punjab, Haryana and the greater New Delhi area don't want to address the contentious issue of nationality among the communities. Anita Ahuja, director of Conserve India, an NGO working with "rag-pickers" (informal garbage collectors who live in slums) admitted that she has had to make special provisions to address the changing language needs in New Delhi and urban Punjab. "Most of the rag-pickers we work with don't speak Hindi or Punjabi, they speak Bengali. So, I have to either hire Bengali speakers or train my staff to communicate in Bengali, otherwise we cannot communicate in the slum areas."

Discomfort with Differences

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15. (SBU) Herkawaljit Singh, of the Punjabi language Ajit Group, echoed the discomfort many Punjabis feel with the rise of Muslim and Dalit migrant communities. He told PolOff that the migrants were "culturally different" from Punjabis and did not integrate into mainstream Punjabi society. Although some Dalit migrants have converted to Sikhism, mainstream Sikh orthodoxy - dominated by the land-owning, wealthier Jat community - views the religious practices of these converts as sacrilegious; some Dalits worship living Sikh "gurus", directly contradicting mainstream Sikh belief. The poor and displaced migrant workers feel excluded from the religious mainstream (Reftel). The inherent tension occasionally spills over into emotive outbursts, confrontations and violence. The mix is particularly volatile in a state like Punjab, which has the highest proportion of Dalits and transitory workers among its population in India.

"Making Us Look Bad"

16. (SBU) Singh argued that the mostly uneducated migrant workers are responsible for many negative social trends, including "skewing the birth rate" in Punjab. Punjab has one of the highest male to female birth ratios in India, a phenomenon generally attributed to the traditional Punjab preference for male heirs over female infants. Singh claimed that most migrants are male workers and come to Punjab without their families, blaming their numbers for coloring demographic surveys and "making Punjab look bad in all the development surveys, they make Punjabis seem backward". Bharadwaj also accused migrant workers of civic unruliness since they do not belong to a strong social network which will restrain anti-social behavior. "After they get paid, they drink, they become rowdy. They don't care about law and order, about clean neighborhoods, about streets, because this is not their home."

Support for Migrant Labor

17. (SBU) Many Punjabi business owners are grateful for cheap labor, praising migrant laborers for becoming "the backbone

of both industry and agriculture in Punjab" after each instance of violent clashes in Punjab. The December 2009 clashes in Ludhiana occurred between police and migrant workers when laborers complained they were robbed of their salaries and accused the local police of inaction on their complaints. S.P. Sharma, of Ludhiana's Apex Chamber of Commerce and Industry, urged the police to provide better security to the migrants. According to the Chamber of Industrial and Commercial Undertakings, Ludhiana alone has 700,000 migrant workers. For Punjab as a whole, the numbers comfortably run in the millions. According to media reports, most of these laborers make between USD \$80-\$130 a month, and live in dingy rooms with eight to ten occupants to save money. Avtar Singh, general secretary of the Chamber of Industrial and Commercial Undertakings said that industry in the city is already facing a 25% labor shortage because migrants had left Punjab fearing increased violence. Industrial and agricultural organizations joined forces and urged greater security for migrant workers from state government officials.

Keeping the Lid on Foment

18. (SBU) COMMENT: In all three of the violent clashes involving migrant communities in 2009, Punjab police reacted quickly, restoring law and order by preventing the riots from getting worse. However, Punjab, which has seen a relatively

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homogenous Punjabi-speaking population since 1947, will have to adjust to the changing religious and cultural demographic pattern on the ground. Given the scars of partition and enduring memories of the communal violence in modern-day Punjab, this may not be easy. Dealing with a permanent labor underclass, viewed as ethnically and culturally different from the mainstream, could become a long-term issue for the prosperous state. It will bear watching how the Punjabi population (and the state government) react if the Muslim call to prayer becomes more pervasive across the state in the years ahead. END COMMENT
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